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DIFFICULTIES OF DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF DIPLOMATIC NEGOTIATIONS ¹

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Ambassador from Brazil to the United States

THE current notion that diplomacy is the art of gravely disguising facts under pleasant words is one of many careless definitions composing the precarious fund of popular wisdom. Indeed public opinion seems to thrive on general impressions and to like vagueness. The explanation of this taste for bold and unconfirmed assertions may be that vagueness encourages discussion, and discussion, not action, is one of the characteristics of democracy, of which public opinion is an essential element. Another pleading for the ill-defined and vague notions that encumber our minds came from the brilliant pen of Prevost-Paradol, when he wrote that "asses alone have only clear ideas." Now, I do not wish to cast a reflection upon the mental conditions of those who make public opinion, but it seems to me that they are too assertive, although their assertions are not less hazy and uncertain than mere guesses. Notwithstanding its constant changes, public opinion is the foundation of popular wisdom, and this leads us to believe that popular wisdom is built upon error, upon unverified impressions, creations of desire and imagination.

This brief aggressive preamble does not express the resentment of a diplomat against the popular misconception of his rôle and character in the comedy of world politics. On the contrary, I rather enjoy this occasion of making a few remarks, very few and cautious, upon diplomacy as it is supposed to be, as it is in reality, as it should be. It is certainly better to charge anonymous public opinion with errors of judgment than to slight the philosophical mind of our friends.

¹ Address delivered at the National Conference on Foreign Relations of the United States, held under the auspices of the Academy of Political Science, at Long Beach, N. Y., May 29, 1917.

And besides if there were no errors to point out, there would be no occasion for assemblies of the wise and thoughtful, no speeches full of good doctrine, no exchange of ideas about the solution of problems of common interest like those studied at this conference. Many years ago I heard that master of eloquence, Emilio Castelar, say that from the oratorical point of view the world was becoming too good, since there were only petty evils left to be attacked in fiery outbursts of rhetorical indignation. He certainly died too soon, as the present times might have shown him that the dragon of iniquity is still alive and rampant among men. He would also rejoice in the number of defenders that justice and right have found all over the world, among whom the hosts of diplomacy make such a brave array.

And this brings me to the point that in time of need diplomacy may also assume the fighting mood and dare to face facts and even to call them names, an attitude not wholly in accordance with the popular conception of diplomatic dealings. It appears on the contrary that, being on the first line of national defense, the diplomats were the first to shoot. The exchange of courtesies of the battle of Fontenoy of old was not observed this time; they started pelting each other with hard truths, that hurt sometimes but are seldom deadly missiles. Was this an infraction of the rule that places the diplomats among the cautious and courteous professional liars? No, indeed. The rule for the diplomatic agent is to speak the truth, his word being deemed sufficient to engage his government's responsibility. Truly there are some among the diplomats who permit themselves to disguise the truth, alleging either self-defense or reasons of state, invoking that antiquated and odious theory that the end justifies the means, claiming a moral code for states different from the one binding individuals together. We know by experience the harm brought upon the world by such a strange combination of the spirit of Machiavelli, Talleyrand and Bismarck, mixed and amalgamated into a Jesuitism without charity. And I wonder if it would not be advisable to include in the program of the next peace conference the adoption of an international code of honor for the diplomatic

career, one of its rules disqualifying for the service those who might bring into it their personal habits of insincerity and deceit. We might be deprived of the collaboration of some able men who cannot play politics if they have to play fair; but then we owe to the countries we represent the sacrifice of brilliancy to seriousness and dignity, and the nations would be better served if all their agents abroad were as jealous of their personal credit as any broker at the stock exchange, or a lawyer before the courts of justice.

Of course I have in mind some whom such an international code would prevent from sitting with us around a table in conference, although we should be glad to have them on the other side of a house of congress as adversaries. The reason is obvious. Representatives of parties eventually contribute toward the welfare of the country by the dispute of power, but to conquer power is their first and principal objective; representatives of governments in collective conferences or in separate negotiations seek agreements that, by conciliating different interests through mutual concessions, promote good feeling between their countries and develop the spirit of international association around a common work, that to be durable must be devoid of personalism and built upon realities. This is why able lawyers and capable political men often fail in diplomacy; they cannot resist the force of habit of winning cases or the temptation of carrying a point in a debate on an international issue. There is a well-known phrase about diplomatic victories that should be written on the walls of the rooms where diplomats meet, if only as a reminder that they need to refrain from putting themselves and their petty ambitions ahead of the countries they represent, and the common interests that it is their mission to foster.

One should not conclude that these warnings against personal impulses in diplomatic transactions somehow justify the popular discredit of diplomacy as an instrument of progress and betterment in international relations. We might as well condemn engineering or medicine because some bridges fell or some people died through the ineptitude of builders or physicians. And undoubtedly more lives pass and more piles

crumble through incapacity of doctors and engineers, than treaties fail by lack of proper care at the hands of diplomatic agents. Only, failures in diplomacy are more remarked, as they are transactions involving national interests and the future of the parties engaged. When we consider the importance of the stakes and the complexity of the game, playing against men, not against natural forces, the wonder is that there are so many good players in diplomacy. In fact they are directed from home and seldom are authorized to "use their own judgment"—a prestigious phrase that fills the man with elation, although it never carries him very far—but information of the conditions, an eye for opportunity, and an unprejudiced mind in dealing with other men, are precious factors for the successful conclusion of a diplomatic transaction.

I know that I am inscribed upon your program to speak about open diplomacy: democratic control of diplomatic negotiations, and I also know that you do not expect me to take the suggestive theme literally, and discuss it to exhaustion. Your courteous attention should not be taxed to that extent. I will therefore only say that my experience of the subject does not encourage the hope that such control may ever become effective. There is indeed an open diplomacy for the people, through the press, when, as the saying is, we "play to the gallery." The democratic influence upon that kind of diplomacy is only indirect. One might call it electoral, or magnetic—mysterious, anyhow, not open in design, dealing in expectations. Needless to say that results are of less importance in such cases; notoriety is what matters. I suppose that nobody cares for this kind of open diplomacy that easily turns into publicity and means self-advertising. The other, the real thing, does not bear much publicity while in course of preparation, if it is to make headway. Representative régimes are based upon confidence. The practical rule of the division of offices and convergence of efforts would be impossible without trust. Advices coming from every quarter would paralyze any action that is not resolved to tear away fears and apprehensions from outside. Philosophically, the man of action should be deaf, because philosophical minds are

inclined to consider and weigh every objection, and the time for action is lost in consideration. There is the story of Buridan's ass to illustrate vividly the deadly equilibrium of a scrupulous mind. The other day I asked a five-year-old child with whom I am relearning life why he did not run both ways, and he promptly replied: "Because that would stop me and I want to run." A wise diplomat could not say better. Perhaps, if he had an essentially conciliatory mind, he would stop to think and try to run both ways, thus losing time and prestige.

This is not intended to justify secretive diplomacy, which is or should be a thing of the past, when "high reasons of state" stopped curiosity or real patriotic interest at the door of the chancelleries. An exchange of trust is more in the spirit of democracy. Truly, discretion must be used in trusting, at the risk of admitting grades in a democracy. But, even if only temporarily and by representation, the will of the people has to be expressed and responded to through a limited number of advisers. By reducing this number to the moderate proportions of a council of state, we may expect an increase in executive efficiency, without impairing the principle of representative government. A measure taken in council cannot be held up to reproach as arbitrary, if that council constitutionally is an organ of national life. Nothing prevents the creation of such a national body unless it is the need of an amendment in our federal constitution to that effect. Through it, the democratic control of diplomatic negotiations would be insured and the responsibility of the executive shared with other organs of the will of the people. Diplomatic acts would not be open to public discussion while in preparation, but the negotiations would not be secret. And, who knows? perhaps the diplomatic agents whose functions are misunderstood by the public and their own governments, to the extent of their being often made mere commercial agents with additional facilities for information—perhaps the diplomats, finding recognition and support in public opinion, would finally be able to raise diplomacy to the standing and dignity to which it is entitled, being, as it is, the first line of national defense.